



FILM: **CHINATOWN**

FDG RATING: 4.5 ☺☺☺☺☺

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Roman Polanski: *director*
Robert Towne: *writer*
Jack Nicholson: *actor, Jake Gittes*
John Huston: *actor, Noah Cross*
Faye Dunaway: *actress, Evelyn Mulwray*

DATE: April 19, 2020

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **CHINATOWN**

In 1975 Chinatown won the Golden Globe for Best Picture – Drama, over The Godfather: Part II (which won seven Oscars, including best picture of the year.) According to many well-respected critics, the film's greatness begins with Robert Towne's tight and purposeful script, a fictionalization of the California Water Wars seen as a film noir detective story. The crimes in "Chinatown" include incest and murder, but the biggest crime is against the city's own future, by men who know that to control the water is to control the wealth. Another published critic noted that Polanski's touch on "Chinatown" is invaluable, and it's his direction including precise framing and camera placement, that ultimately elevates the film to perfection. The film's characters make long-lasting impressions especially the stars: Jack Nicholson as the raw, detached, sarcastic, cynical private eye, Jake Gittes; John Huston as scheming, powerful, millionaire, Noah Cross, who wants to control the future; and Faye Dunaway is stunning as the melancholy, elegant, classic femme fatale, Mrs. Evelyn Mulwray, arguably the best performance of her career.

Chinatown is a complex and bleak detective story. It demonstrates that, in some situations, a detective cannot know what's really going on. And if he eventually does figure it out, there's nothing he can do to stop the cruel, ruthlessness. The film builds on the familiar detective story device of the private eye taking a case that's much more complicated than it at first seems. In this movie, almost nothing is what it seems: the alleged mistress, dumping water into the ocean, the recorded buyers of farmland in the Valley, a bond issue to bring water to LA, even the water in a garden pond are not what they appear to be. And the crucial character is not Hollis Mulwray, the public-spirited water engineer suspected of having an affair, but his capitalist ex-partner Noah Cross, who plans to use City water to get richer, murders Hollis Mulwray, and turns out to have fathered Hollis's alleged girlfriend Katherine by his daughter Evelyn. Jake, who is worldly wise on the subject of marital infidelity, is naive when it comes to power and perversion, i.e Noah Cross and Evelyn.

Jake might know better than to believe appearances. When he worked in Chinatown, he did "as little as possible", as the DA advised. That's because in Chinatown, you can't tell what's really going on. You can't understand the language, the culture, the tongs. Once, Jake had tried to help a girl there, and what he did ended up hurting her. He doesn't realize that in this case, the powerful men of LA make him as helpless in the city as he was in Chinatown. Just as before, he tries to help Evelyn and she is killed. Jake's confidence in himself is a big contributor to his errors. He misinterprets clues, mostly fails to read Evelyn's nervousness and lying, but he's always got a new explanation.

We agreed this film has all the right elements for a great film from script, to cinematography, score and acting. The shocking incest revelation and unexpected murder of Eve at the end hits just as hard even after multiple viewings over a span of multiple years.

The film may ultimately be pretty bleak, in mood and message but Jake's successive revelations, and the efforts of his adversaries to deter him, make the film noir story compelling and entertaining. L.A. in the late 30s is captured beautifully. Handsome settings and excellent acting by Nicholson, Dunaway, and Huston give strong support to a psychologically unsettling, plot-driven movie.

We awarded Chinatown one of the highest scores of all the films we have discussed since 2011: A well deserved 4.5 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best)



See you at the movies!

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